

**Sermon for Sunday, July 11, 2010**  
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**GOD STANDS ACCUSED**  
**Romans 9:14-24**

**1. God Stands Accused**

In an essay on barriers to faith, C. S. Lewis once said: "The greatest barrier is the almost total absence of any sense of sin." People are self-righteous. The gospel promises healing for sin-sick souls, but people will not take the remedy if they reject the diagnosis. Once, people approached God humbly as a man approaches his judge. But today, "the roles are reversed." Each man is judge and "God is in the dock" – on trial.<sup>1</sup>

People may be willing to acquit God if He can give a good account of Himself. But He must answer these questions: God, how can you permit war, disease and poverty? What about earthquakes and volcanoes, God? Why do you let good people die? Why has so much evil been done in your name? How can you prefer people who embrace one religion over another? People may acquit God if His answers, from the Bible, satisfy them. But humanity is the judge and God is on trial.

In Romans 8-9, Paul presented what is called the doctrine of unconditional election. That is God sovereignly chose to call some people to Himself apart from any works they performed, any faith or service He could foresee:

The Bible says, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son... And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." (Romans 8:29-30)

This teaching, as much as any, leads people to question God. Romans 9 invites it and answers it vigorously, yet not necessarily as we would expect. Above all, Paul insists that God does make decisions that shape, even determine human life, and is absolutely free to do so. Some He chooses and calls to Himself. Others He passes by, letting them stay in their sin. He still speaks to them, but apart from His renewing grace, His speech and acts hardens them in their rebellion.

In our last study from Romans 9, Paul reminds the church that the patriarch Isaac and his wife Rebekah had twin sons. In a clear case of election, God chose Jacob over Esau. **Why** Jacob? Was he more noble, talented, or spiritual? No, Jacob was no better than Esau. Esau was violent and self-indulgent. He cared nothing for his birthright and his potential role as leader of the covenant family. Jacob did care, but for bad reasons. The birthright meant a larger inheritance and Jacob always seems to be scheming and deceiving to get more for himself.

Someone objects: "Isn't that unjust?" Paul makes it a question in 9:14: "Is God unjust?" A paragraph later, someone "talks back" to God and says, if God is sovereign in election, "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" (9:20) They ask, "How can God hold me responsible, if he is sovereign?"

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<sup>1</sup> *"God in the Dock"* in *The Grand Miracle*. NY, Ballantine, 1970 p. 149

This is an important question. The Bible answers: God is sovereign, yet we are free and accountable. God is sovereign, yet He never compels humans to do anything against His will. We do what we choose to do.

This is not a paradox, it is to be precise an antinomy: anti (against) + nomos (law), two laws that stand against each other. A paradox is an apparent contradiction that can be resolved if we clarify the language.

Example: **God's service is perfect freedom.** It's an *apparent* contradiction because the meaning is clear. When we serve God, we may initially think we're losing our freedom. But once we accept Jesus as Lord, we find our life opening up, so it's richer than ever. It opens whole ranks of constructive choices.

Again, "When I am weak, then I am strong" is a paradox; it seems to be contradictory, but is not. We can restate it so it's clear: When I see my weakness, I rely on God, call on His strength, and He grants it, so I am strong.

But the statements "God is sovereign; mankind is free and responsible" cannot be restated so that the meaning is obvious, "Now that you say it that way." You can't restate "God is sovereign; humanity is free and responsible" so that the problem disappears and everything is easy to grasp. They are both true, even though they seem incompatible.

There is a parallel in physics. There is strong evidence that light is a wave and strong evidence that it is a particle. Theories that treat light as a wave are cogent, as are theories that it is a particle. Both theories "work" in the external world. We cannot see how both can be true, yet it's best to say that they are.

The same holds for divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Both are taught in Scripture. Both are true to experience. We know that our choices for good or for evil are our own. Yet we know God is sovereign. That's why we pray. We ask Him to help because we know He can. We thank Him for gifts because we know He gives. We praise Him for saving us – we don't congratulate ourselves.

So we don't try to reconcile the two truths – divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We accept both. Someone once asked a pastor, "How do you reconcile divine sovereignty and human responsibility?" He replied, "I don't try to reconcile friends." And they are theological friends, both true, both essential. In Romans 9, the accent falls on God's sovereignty. There were hints earlier: Romans 2 said there are two "Israels" - one of the flesh, one of the spirit. An outward Israel, an inward Israel. Romans 9 says Abraham had several sons; he chose Isaac. He loved and chose Jacob, not Esau. Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Is that unfair?

## **2. God has mercy on whom He wills (9:14-18)**

Romans 9:14 asks, "Is God unjust?" Literally, "Is there injustice with God?" This is a new version of an old question. Since the fall, humans have blamed God for their problems. Why did Adam sin? He tells God that it's because of "the woman you gave me" (Genesis 3:12). Can humans blame God for their sin? Do people sin because of God? Is God unjust to choose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob over others?

Paul replies: Never! No way. Absolutely not. He begins with this strong refusal for a reason. People want to blame and judge God, but they must know that they have no right to condemn God. We are creatures; He is the creator.

In fact, our very sense of right and wrong comes from God. If He were not just, we wouldn't even ask the question. The worst tyrants defend their brutality in public and question themselves in private. Why? Because God made them in His image, with a moral sense. (The best people question themselves, too. We ask ourselves: Am I following my standards? Am I doing justice and loving mercy? What is the source of this universal desire to do what is right, or at least to appear to do what's right? We are created in the image of a moral God!)

Still the question seems important. Why did God show mercy to Jacob, not Esau? To Israel, not Egypt? Instinct says, "What you do for one, you should do for another." Is that true? Paul says, first, the question misses something: If we want justice, all will be condemned, because no one is righteous, not one (3:10).

Second, the demand for justice misses the nature of the situation. The crucial statement is 9:15: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." In 9:18, Paul restates, "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy." Theme: God has mercy and compassion.

Mercy and compassion are not identical traits. Compassion is a feeling for another or empathy. We feel another person's wound or anguish. So then, compassion normally has a reason. If we see an abandoned child, we empathize. We know what they feel. So, one hopes, we do something to help.

Mercy is different. By definition, mercy goes to those who deserve judgment. It's absurd to say, "Why doesn't God show mercy to everyone?" as if He were obligated. People ask for mercy when they suspect they deserve the opposite. God doesn't owe anyone mercy.

I once had a student who thought I lectured too fast. He came to a few classes, then disappeared without explanation. In fact, he was working on the internet, listening to related lectures I had given a couple years earlier. He also read one of my books. He felt that he learned more this way. Unfortunately, he didn't read the course guide or hear class announcements, so he failed to turn in the term paper. A month after the class ended, when he received his grade, he realized his mistake. And he blamed me. "This happened because you lecture too rapidly. I had to leave class. I don't deserve a zero for the assignment. You owe me a better grade." He demanded justice.

At length I said, "You keep saying 'I deserve' and 'You owe me.' You're not asking for mercy, you're appealing to justice. The course has been over for a month and you never turned in your paper. Justice you have demanded; justice you will receive. No paper =  $\emptyset$ ." Was I unfair? Was I unjust to give him justice?

The question can come two ways - As an accusation: "Why doesn't God give mercy to all?" We owe justice, but no one owes mercy to anyone. God certainly doesn't. Or it can come as a humble question: Lord, tell us why you don't offer mercy to all, save all?" It's a good question, but God offers only a partial answer. <sup>2</sup>

The case of Jacob and Esau fits the question perfectly. Like the twins, humans stand guilty before God. Neither has a right to demand mercy. God said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and... compassion on whom I have compassion." This means that the question "Is God unjust to redeem Jacob, but not Esau?" is misconceived. God has mercy as he chooses - "on whom I will have mercy" (9:15).

The Lord says this right after He had delivered Israel from Egypt. He gave them His covenant and His law. Moses stayed on Mt. Sinai with God forty more days and the people became restless (Exodus 24:18, 34:28).

Now the law said "Make no idols" and Israel had sworn to obey it. Yet they approached Aaron, brother of Moses and his second in command and said, "Make us gods who will go before us.... We don't know what has happened to [Moses]" (Exodus 32:1). Aaron succumbed, made them an idol, and called a festival which soon became a drunken riot (Exodus 32:2-6).

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<sup>2</sup> Boice, *Romans*, page 1072-4.

God told Moses that He refused to accompany Israel any longer. Moses reasoned with God: If you fail to lead your people into Canaan, what will come of your promises to give a land to Abraham? He said, "If you don't go, don't send us into the land. Your presence distinguishes us from all nations." The LORD relented and to seal His promise, he revealed His name and glory to Moses, saying, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." So "sovereign mercy" amounts to a name of God.

Romans 9:16 states the conclusion we must draw from God's love for Jacob: It "does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." But now He will explain the other side of the Jacob/Esau affair. Why did He not choose Esau? The story of Pharaoh will explain it.

### **Pharaoh - 9:17-18**

Romans 9:17 declares, "Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'" I must make a side comment here: This quotation is from Exodus 9:16, where God tells Pharaoh, yet again, "Let my people go." But Paul wrote "Scripture says to Pharaoh." We see therefore that "God says" and "Scripture says" mean the same thing. Truly, Scripture is the word of God. What Scripture says, God says.<sup>3</sup>

Now the major point. This is a second answer to the charge God is unjust. First, God is just because mercy is a free and sovereign gift, not a duty. Second, God is just because God raised up Pharaoh "that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." That is, God passed by Pharaoh to display his character, not otherwise known.

To see how this is just, we must remember the story. This is depending on how we count the fifth or sixth time God speaks to Pharaoh through Moses (5:1, 7:16, 8:1, 20-21, 9:1, 13, 10:3). Egypt's rulers had enslaved the Israelites, simply because they had the power to do so. Further, it fit their ideology. The king theoretically owned all his people. And slavery was common.

God commanded Pharaoh, "Let my people go" over and over. Pharaoh said, "No" every time. In the beginning, God sent light judgments or plagues to warn Pharaoh. Plagues two through four were frogs, gnats (or lice) and flies (Exodus 7:25-8:32). Pharaoh was not moved, was not impressed, did not relent. Therefore God increased His judgment. Each plague did more to demonstrate that God has more power than the gods or the armies of Egypt. Thus God displayed his power.

Is that unjust? Someone will accuse: "God is unfair to use Pharaoh for His purposes. God even says later that He hardened Pharaoh's heart. To harden is to become insensitive, unreceptive, disobedient to God. If hardness isn't reversed, it leads finally to damnation. And Paul says, "God hardens whom he wants to harden". Paul seems to be begging for the charge "That is not fair or just."

But wait: The Bible never says God hardens the heart of anyone unless they first harden their heart toward Him. First, we harden our hearts. Then, sometimes, God says, "Fine, as you wish."

In fact, Pharaoh rejects God's word, his servants and his will at least fifteen times in Exodus - Exodus 5, 7:13-22, 8:15-19, 32, 9:7, 17, 27, etc. Pharaoh hardened himself repeatedly. Then, about the tenth time Pharaoh refused God, the Lord hardened him (Exodus 9:12). This is "a judicial act, abandoning him to his own stubbornness". As Paul said in Romans 1, God punishes the ungodly by giving them over to their own depravity, obstinacy.

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<sup>3</sup> Warfield, *Inspiration Authority of Scripture*

God punishes willful deafness: He tells Isaiah, as he starts his ministry, "Make the heart of this people calloused." Jesus quotes the same passage when Israel refuses to heed him. This is no injustice! Pharaoh acted according to his nature and pattern. He did what he had always done. He oppressed and exploited the weak. God let him continue in that. He owed Pharaoh no more.

To say it another way: When Pharaoh refused God, the Lord didn't stop speaking to Pharaoh, even though He knew that each additional speech or act would make him more obstinate than ever. Why? I can offer a partial answer – not final:

- The result: God displayed His might in an unprecedented way.
- God demonstrated that He doesn't owe anyone mercy. This amplifies the truth that His mercy is mercy indeed: "He did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy" (9:23).

God has the right to display the consequences of wickedness in a person like Pharaoh. Pharaoh stands condemned, for he chose to kill and oppress. God, who is under no obligation to offer mercy, sealed Pharaoh in his sin. He did so simply by continuing to act to deliver his people. Any word, any act by God would simply make Pharaoh more and more obstinate.

You know this from conversations with some people. When someone is really angry and confident and self-righteous and wrong, no matter what you say or do, it simply inflames them more. The only thing that calms them is total silence. Yet God refused to be silent. This is not cruel or unjust to Pharaoh.

We can get at this another way. When Jesus opened his ministry, he did not say, "Believe in me and go to heaven." He said, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." Sending people to heaven is not Jesus' prime goal. Before he spoke of salvation, Jesus spoke of repentance. Why? As important as salvation is, God has more for us. He wants us to be fully prepared for eternal life in His new creation. The goal is more than painless bliss in a bank of white clouds.

If God shot an angry, unrepentant man to heaven, he would hate it – at best. It would appall and terrify him to be in the presence of the holy God and the vast throngs that praise and follow Him. He would resent worship. He would begrudge any obedience. If possible, He would subvert and ruin God's holy reign. If God shot Pharaoh to heaven as he was, he would have hated it. In theological terms: As important as forgiveness of sins and justification by faith may be, they are the beginning, not the end, of salvation.

### **3. No human has the right to call God to account (9:19-24)**

Still, someone will say, "But God says he raised Pharaoh up for this. Romans 9:19 says "why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" How can God find fault if Pharaoh does his bidding?

Answer: Who are you, O man, to answer back to God, to question him. God is the potter, we are the clay. The potter does as he pleases. This is an old image from the old world, picked up in Jeremiah and Isaiah. Potters make pots that are plain – slop buckets – and elegant – glazed and decorated for festal meals. Surely he has the right to do that. Can the clay question His design? Well we do, but we don't properly have the right. God is so much greater than we are.

Consider His works, the vastness of His creation. Perhaps summer vacation let you see the milky way. So here is a calculation. The sun is ninety-three millions miles from the earth. Let's take that distance and make it the width of a piece of paper. The width of the solar system would be 60-100 sheets depending on the view of boundaries. The nearest star would be a stack of paper 100 feet high and our galaxy, just one of billions of galaxies, would be a stack 300 miles high (precisely  $6 \times 10$  to  $9^{\text{th}}$  power sheets of paper). That's the size of the universe.

But God also fine-tuned creation for life in dozens of ways. If gravity is a little stronger, the universe would be a black hole. If it is a little weaker, nothing would cohere. If earth were a little closer to the sun, oceans would boil away. If a little farther, earth would be a lifeless ice-world.

And the Lord has purposes we cannot comprehend. Elizabeth Elliot tells the story of time spent at a shepherd's farm in Wales. It came time to dip the sheep into a bath to remove parasites. Sheep are terrified in a tight pen. Snarling sheep dogs keeps them in line. The shepherd immerses them, head under water for several seconds in this cold bath without a word of explanation. Sheep wouldn't get it if he tried. God is the shepherd, we are sheep. His ways are beyond us and He is not afraid to say so." I will have mercy on whom I have mercy" and "He hardens whom he wants to harden." We simply have no right to question God.

What then? Know that we are absolutely dependent on God in the matter of eternal salvation. If we come to Him, He chose to have mercy – shown in externals: Bible, parents, teachers, churches.

We should worship God humbly. Know that He called you, and gave you eternal life not because of your merit or foreseen service or any other thing. He chose to give you new life as marvelous as finding the love of your life, as easily taken for granted as the privilege of living in America. Give thanks!

When you see an open sinner, be gracious and patient. The difference between you and another is God's grace, not your merit. God saved you despite your sin, according to his good pleasure.

Keep an eye out for God's sovereign favor in life. One week during this study leave, I was out of contact by cell phone or email for eight days. I decided to go to a sandwich and bread store nearby to get some bread and to check email. After I was there ten minutes, my cell phone rang. It was a friend, calling from Australia, 2:30 a.m. their time. I said, "What are the odds? If you had called any other time, I wouldn't have answered." But it was important that we talk. It was no accident, it was God's sovereign mercy.

Make no presumption, no discouragement. No despairing thoughts: I have long rebelled against God, or given Him no thought. He could pass me by! He could harden me. O that very thought, that very concern, suggests that God is showing you mercy and will bring you to Himself.

But no presumption. We have no right to put God on trial. He is the creator, the potter. You are the creature, the pot. God neither owes you grace nor even an explanation. O Christian, humble yourself before the Lord! O skeptic, do not presume. Today hear His voice. Do not harden your heart. Trust the Lord who has mercy. No one who comes to Him will be put to shame.